



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session I: Inter-cultural, Inter-religious, and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Conflict Prevention and Post-Conflict Reconciliation

As prepared for delivery by Ms. Sharee Freeman,
Director of Community Relations Service, U.S. Dept. of Justice
to the OSCE Meeting on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and
Inter-Ethnic Understanding, Almaty Kazakhstan
June 12, 2006

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be part of this session today and a pleasure to offer my perspective on the benefits of establishing dialogues as a method of inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic dialogue in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconciliation in communities across the world.

Inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic dialogue is both fundamental and crucial to promoting inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic tolerance and understanding.

I. A Little Bit About CRS

Before I begin I would like to tell you a little bit about my agency, the United States Department of Justice Community Relations Service, CRS.

CRS was established by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and works to resolve and prevent community conflicts and tensions arising from differences in race, color, or national origin. CRS provides a range of services, such as mediation, conciliation, technical assistance, and training to local communities. CRS deploys highly skilled, professional, and culturally competent mediators to assist parties in conflict to develop and implement their own solutions to race-based problems. CRS' services are confidential, neutral, and free of charge and are designed to serve as a catalyst for peaceful resolution.

Allow me to use examples of programs and premises on which CRS operates to share with you efforts aimed at promoting inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic understanding and dialogue that the United States has taken.

CRS serves as a neutral and confidential facilitator to bring racially and culturally diverse communities in conflict together and serves to provide a stage on which community members, government officials, law enforcement officials, and community leaders may express their frustrations and concerns, identify and address issues, and collaboratively work to develop multilateral measures and solutions to remedy said issues and implement mechanisms aimed at preventing future conflicts.

Topics of a dialogue may include police-community relations, perceptions of disparity of treatment in educational opportunities, differences in treatment in the provision of public services, and sometimes how to cool tempers after a race riot.

CRS, interestingly enough, is a federal entity, and often local people may be initially reluctant to allow a federal entity into their community to broker a dialogue. However, CRS' effectiveness as a federal entity in providing conflict resolution services is based on our neutrality, our confidentiality, and most importantly on our prior established trusted relationships with the police, the mayor, the city manager, the school superintendent, community leaders, community activists, and local community ministers and clergy.

II. Dialogues

CRS facilitates dialogues involving community discussion and interaction with the local government structure (police, mayor, city manager, school superintendent). For instance, in a small town in New York in December 2004, approximately 100 White and African American students were involved in a racial brawl at a local high school. Allegations were made that there was a disparity of treatment between Black and White students when police arrived to quell the brawl. At the request of African American community leaders, CRS facilitated a dialogue between community members, parents of the students, school officials, students, and the police department. In this way, CRS enabled the community to communicate through a dialogue with the government structure in the community. CRS bridged the gap between the African American community and police officials to enable them to work jointly to resolve the tension in their community. As a result of this dialogue, CRS resolved other issues between the two ethnic groups in the community.

CRS is focused not just in resolving conflict but our goal, our strategic plan, is to build capacity in the community to create mechanisms by which the community can prevent, or respond to subsequent conflicts without our intervention.

Some of these mechanisms can include facilitation of the development of policies and procedures, police/citizen advisory boards, or simple experiences where community members can positively interact with those from other backgrounds to change perceptions and ultimately hearts and minds. Other models for dialogue include community-wide study circles, Samoan circles, inter-group dialogues, round tables, mediation, street dialogues during protest marches, demonstrations or prayer vigils, town halls and forums, ministerial alliance meetings and religious community exchange programs.

A specialized method of dialogue that CRS uses is the CRS City Site Problem Identification and Resolution of Issues Together Program (SPIRIT).

An example of this is, CRS was alerted to increasing racial tensions in a community due to the influx of new immigrants. CRS conducted the City SPIRIT after city officials requested CRS intervention. Approximately 100 people participated in the initiative that allowed for discussions on how a more racially diverse and expanding population could solve racial tensions involving fire and police departments, businesses, primary and secondary schools, medical and health facilities and social services. Participants represented a cross-section of the community, including businesses, clergy, schools and colleges, hospital, health and emergency services and the media. Two representatives from each group were selected to participate on the SPIRIT Advisory Council. CRS then trained 19 facilitators and all City-SPIRIT participants to identify racial or ethnic-origin problems in their respective groups and find solutions to these problems. CRS coordinated with City-SPIRIT representatives to finalize solutions agreed upon by all parties, which included a referral information service and bilingual counselors to assist newly emerging populations.

This program brings together all of the parties in the community to jointly solve whatever ethnic, racial or national origin-based issues are present there.

Former President Lyndon B. Johnson, speaking to the purpose of the creation of the Community Relations Service in the Civil Rights Act of 1964: [the Community Relations Service was created to] “promote a more abiding commitment to freedom, a more constant pursuit of justice, and a deeper respect for human dignity” through “voluntary compliance [and] the efforts of local communities and States to secure the rights of citizens.”

Thank you for allowing me to speak before you all today. It is truly a privilege to be here and I look forward to discussing further with you ideas and best practices to implement change in your communities.